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## Private of phenomenological writing? : body feminism fumbling its surprising way

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## REPORTS & REVIEWS

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### Private or phenomenological writing? Body feminism fumbling its surprising way

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Jo Malin [ed.] (2010), *My Life at the Gym. Feminist Perspectives on Community through the Body*, State University of New York (SUNY) Press, Albany/New York, 164 pp. ISBN 978-14384-2944-1

What can feminism contribute to the study of body and sport? During the last decades, three different answers have been given to this question, and they reappear also in this book:

- Critique of male hegemony in body culture
- Subjectivity as quest of alternative method in writing
- Community through bodily practice.

The patchwork of texts collected in this American volume casts surprising light on those three arguments and potentials – and on their inner contradictions.

#### Against the tyranny of slenderness – or jubilation for exercise?

Feminism gained its political and intellectual power during the 1970s by its critique of patriarchal patterns in thinking and in social life. Male hegemony in sport and phallogocentric visions of both the masculine and the feminine body were challenged by feminist critique, and this opposition has ever since remained an important driving force of gender-political counter-culture. And yet, the question rises what this critique concretely is directed against – and what it argues for.

Jo Malin, assistant professor at the State University of New York (SUNY) and author of several books on gender politics, introduces this collected volume by pointing to a paradox, which deserves intellectual attention, indeed (pp. 2-5). When the new wave of feminist critique began in the 1970/80s, male hegemony was revealed as a “tyranny of slenderness”. This was the title of a book from 1981,<sup>1</sup> and the

opposition continued when Susan Bordo, one of the most remarkable writers of body feminism, presented her critical analysis of eating disorders.<sup>2</sup> Female eating disorders were, as she argued, a logical outcome of patriarchy and its pressure towards the ever-shrinking ideal female body, and they would accelerate when women made career in the patriarchal system. “Starving to be thin” – thus it seemed clear, which imaginations, myths and practices body feminism was up against. Feminism meant defense of the woman’s right to be large, and to be proud of it. Body feminism would stand firmly against the terror of exercise. The slender, anorectic ideal of the female body expressed a sort of health fascism.

One or two decades later, however, the picture has changed basically. Women have not become thinner under the pressure of the male gaze. Eating disorders of the starving type are, surely, still a problem, but only for a small minority – between 1 percent (anorexia) and 4 percent (bulimia). Instead, women got ever larger. Now overweight and obesity became a central theme of Western body culture and were spreading towards other parts of the world. One can ask whether feminism consequently has to revise the brilliant analyses of Susan Bordo and other feminists from the 1980/90s

The collected volume of Malin can indeed be read as such a surprising revision. Its chapters express the joy of exercise, not its tyranny.

“As feminist scholars mostly in the field of literature and women’s studies, we all are women with bodies that need the exercise that will help us to thrive and even live longer. In addition, those who ignore exercise not only lose an avenue to improving and sustaining health but also one for enjoyment and community” (p. 5).

<sup>1</sup> Kim Chernin (1981), *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*, Harper & Row, New York.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Bordo (1993), *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

The implicit undertone of threat against the “ignorant” non-exercisers may be shocking reading for the earlier generation of body feminism. Feminist critique seems to have turned 180 degrees. This turn happened, however, not as a critique of the critique (i.e. by explicit self-critique), but by just writing the opposite – and feeling the opposite.

One may ask, whether this turn is naive. Maybe it is owed to a lack of intellectual seriousness – just returning to the normalization, which once was criticized by Bordo and Foucault. Maybe it expresses a poetic joke striking against (male?) demands of rationality. May be the one, maybe the other – and here we are at the second feature of feminist body writing, the question of alternative method.

### Autistic feelism as epistemological alternative?

What most of the texts in this collected volume do, is to mobilize personal narratives. The narratives are from the world of dance (part 1), from the gym, the weight room, the studio and the pool (part 2), and from the road, the slopes, and the green nature (part 3). Some of these narratives are well-written, some poetical in form or style, some in verses. Autobiographical memories, personal confessions, centered about “my body” and “my individual identity”. “I have felt this... then I felt this... which wonderful feeling!”

And yet, why should the reader read this? Some experiences may be good to be *done*, not to be *written*. Isn't there too much writing in this world anyway?

“My life at the gym”, the book title can be read literally – and critically: It is not about *their* life in the gym, neither as social analysis by using questionnaires and statistics (which, surely, could be understood as male rationality and reification), nor as critical description on distance. Nor is it about *your* life in the gym, as one could imagine with reference to Martin Buber's phenomenology of I-you relation. No, it is about *my* life, my subjective first-hand experience. Here and there, this subjectivity is spiced by second-hand references to “postmodern” literary theory.

The focus on private feelings is a problem, which has in the North ironically been called *føleri*, feelism. (Typically, feelism is also characterized by a striking lack of humor, of laughter and irony.) Is, however, subjectivity the only way out of positivism, objectivism and reification?

It may be true that, as one of the authors writes, her body elegy – just like any other poem – has elements of autism (p. 19). And she is so honest to confess “a loss of words” (p. 25) when confronted with a dancer. But this does not make the alternative

more convincing: reading words that are lost, words that cannot find their language, re-reading autistic privacy?

Another author, who writes about her rowing experiences, follows up Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine* (1975): Phallogocratic writing is connected with the history of reason, while feminist writing is creative, associational and relational – much like rowing (pp. 125 and 130). Maybe this dualism is useful, maybe not. (Male writers have during the recent decades experimented with similar forms of subjective, autobiographic, creative writing, sometimes struggling with similar problems of feelism.<sup>3</sup>) But luckily this collection also includes analyses which are substantially different from the naivety of creative dance and rowing, and which mediate more than private feelings of jubilation.

### Comparative studies as a third way

If phallogocratic-statistic *objectivism* is the one thing and private-narrative *subjectivism* is the other, then one can move to a third – yes, we are on a trialectical way – to *inter-subjective* writing. Here we meet the comparative method as an alternative. Comparative study opens towards “the other”. But what to compare, and how to compare?

Susan Young, researcher in feminist popular culture at the City University of New York (CUNY), offers her body autobiography as a way “from ballet to boxing” by passing ice-skating (pp. 43 ff). This develops into an explorative comparison inside Young's own biography and the related milieus. By dancing, she experienced herself as a “swan”. For the same person as a female boxer, there was a “panther” inside. These comparisons bring forth many illustrative nuances and observations of ache and illusions of weightlessness, of self-discipline and conformity, of hierarchy and rituals, of female maturation and physical empowerment – and of different forms of community building among women. This is good reading, indeed.

<sup>3</sup> Finnish, Danish and English texts in the collections of Henning Eichberg [ed.] (1994), *Narrative Sociology*. Special issue of: *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 29:1. – Andrew Sparkes & Martti Silvennoinen [eds.] (1999), *Talking Bodies. Men's Narratives of the Body and Sport*, SoPhi, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä. – Jim Denison & Robert Rinehart (2000) (introduction), *Imagining Sociological Narratives*. Special issue of “*Sociology of Sport Journal*”, 17:1. – Jim Denison & Pirkko Markula (2003), *Moving Writing. Crafting Movement in Sport Research*, Peter Lang, New York. – See also the bold doctoral dissertation of Scott G. Gaule (2005), *Meeting up with the Worlds of Exercise and Rave at the Start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Story about Young People, Body Culture, Health and Identity in Changing Times*, Liverpool.

Another study, by Kristine Newhall, compares indoor cycling with aerobics (pp. 65 ff). Though somewhat missionary-pedagogical in its undertones, the narrative contributes to a configurational understanding of differences inside the world of fitness activities.

A comparative method, thus, opens up towards varieties and contradictions inside "my life", towards dialectical thinking – which is more than the dualism of male versus female. Comparison is, furthermore, a way to reach the "sharing", which Jo Malin in her introduction dreams of (p. 14). Writing is not only expression of one's own self, but the writer shares her experiences and observations with others. There is – beyond objectivism – not only "my subjective life at the gym" with its private autism, not only feelism, but also narrative meeting and relation. Inter-subjective phenomenology is a third way.

### From solipsism to socialist utopia

Phenomenology as a critical-comparative method of body feminism has a political significance. Jacqueline Brady who researches at the CUNY in the history of bodybuilding, names "three of the most general mistakes of capitalism": hiding labor, ignoring history, and erasing community (p. 80). What a sharp point!

This is not only one of those anti-capitalist remarks as they are launched against some "others". The observation has not at least self-critical quality. Brady refers (self-) critically to the "third wave" feminism, which venerated the production of female muscularity: Women in the gym have largely ignored its history – which is the history of commercial investment. On line with the naive New Age notion that "changing the self changes the world", feminists have confused self-expression and selfism (p. 87). And pointing to the American female torturers of Abu Graib prison in Iraq who "flexed their muscles for the camera to show their dominance over their helpless Iraqi victims", she concludes that "in an unstable world neither our individuated bodies nor our individual selves are dependable sources of power" – of women's power (p. 89). Muscular feminism ok – but the veneration of the woman warrior deserves to be questioned. It is as problematic as the naive jubilation of the exercising woman in some texts of the present volume.

"More reliable strength lies", as Brady sums up, "in the vigorous gathering of women whose collective energy is mobilized in a work out and the work for social change." Where we land, is, finally, the keyword "community". Community can be found in the subtitle of the book, and it was

among the three features of feminist gain, which were initially named. Women build community by bodily practice, community through the body – this is what the book wants to tell. And women share their experience by community writing, by epistemological communitarism. From epistemological solipsism – "I feel... my life... I wannabe myself" – a way goes to epistemological socialism. From having a body and being one's body – a traditional Western dualism – a way goes to meeting body. There is a connection between the inter-subjective way of phenomenology and the associational way of community practice

Maybe, this community is utopian. But wasn't socialism – at its best – always utopian?

### Prywatne czy fenomenologiczne pisarstwo? Feminizm ciała przybiera zaskakującą formę

**Słowa kluczowe:** feminizm, wspólnota, cielesność

#### Streszczenie

Praca Henninga Eichberga stanowi analizę oraz recenzję książki Jo Marlin zatytułowanej *My Life at the Gym. Feminist Perspectives on Community through the Body. (Moje życie na siłowni. Feministyczne spojrzenie na wspólnotę poprzez ciało)* oraz zawiera odniesienia do innych pisarek feministycznych.

Książka Jo Marlin jest zbiorem tekstów opisujących osobiste doświadczenia pisarki ze świata tańca, obiektów sportowych, a także natury, które według autora recenzji, w zaskakujący sposób, odpowiadają na pytanie: w jaki sposób feminizm może przyczynić się do badań dotyczących ciała oraz sportu. W ciągu trzech ostatnich dekad pojawiały się różne odpowiedzi na to pytanie i niektóre z nich znajdują się w książce Jo Malin. Książka obejmuje krytykę męskiej hegemonii w kulturze ciała, podmiotowość jako alternatywną metodę w pisaniu, poczucie wspólnoty poprzez praktyki ciała. Teksty amerykańskiej autorki wielu książek dotyczących tematu płci społeczno-kulturowej (*gender studies*) rzucają światło na powyższe trzy argumenty, ich potencjał i wewnętrzne sprzeczności.

Eichberg odnosząc się do Susan Bordo i innych pisarek feministycznych z lat 1980/90 zastanawia się jak zmieniło się podejście kobiet do swojego ciała, czy nadal pozostają pod wpływem męskich wyobrażeń o idealnej sylwetce, czy też ćwiczą dla siebie i swojego zdrowia. W kolejnym fragmencie autor zastanawia się nad wartością książki komentując jej ciekawy poetycki oraz osobisty styl. Według Eichberga, dialektyczny sposób myślenia jest czymś więcej niż dualizmem mężczyzny wobec kobiety. Pisanie jest nie tylko sposobem na wyrażenie siebie ale także dzieleniem się obserwacjami z innymi. Nie jest to tylko „prywatny autyzm, wyrażenie uczuć, spotkanie narracji i relacji, ale trzeci sposób – inter-subiektywna fenomenologia”. Społeczność/wspólnota obecna w tytule książki jest ważnym elementem w życiu kobiet, które dzielą się ze społecznością poprzez epistemologiczny komunitaryzm.